Leprosy in Mesopotamia

Abstract
Leprosy is an ancient disease, known from South Asia since at least 2000 BCE. While there is no physical evidence of this disease in the region before about 50 CE, five different words are translated as “leprosy” in Mesopotamian texts and some of them occur frequently. Based on the texts, one word (garāṣu) is rarely used and there is evidence that the other four words relate to diseases that were treated, could be cured and, did not always require that affected individuals be permanently excluded from society. From this we conclude that the four commonly seen words do not describe modern leprosy. Three words (ṣaharaṣubbū, ṣepu, garābu) also signify “scales” or “scabs”, which naturally prompts the speculation that they are skin diseases more serious than eczema. The final word (būšānu) has been associated with several modern diseases, but the common feature appears to be a bacterial infection affecting the skin, mouth and nose.

Key words: Infection, Leprosy, Mesopotamia, Skin disease

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**Introduction**

Leprosy is caused by infection with *Mycobacterium leprae*. In the relatively mild tuberculoid form, the disease is characterised by pale or reddish skin lesions, numbness and muscle weakness. In the severe lepromatous form, the dermis is thickened, producing the nodules frequently associated with the disease, and there is often involvement of the nasal mucosa.\(^1\)

The seventh century Greek Byzantine physician, Paul of Ægina wrote an influential medical encyclopaedia\(^2\) in which he described various forms of “leprosy”, including *leuce, alphans* and *lepra* (from which the word leprosy is derived and was the Greek translation of the Hebrew *sāraʿ at* in the Septuagint).\(^3\) However, none of these corresponds to the modern conception of the disease, which is probably what Paul called *elephantiasis* or *elephas*\(^4\), which should not be confused with lymphatic filariasis, which is also known as elephantiasis.\(^5\) He also distinguished these forms of “leprosy” from skin diseases, such as psoriasis or scabies.\(^6\)

During the preceding millennia, many terms had been used for skin diseases in Mesopotamia. For example, five words meaning “leprosy” are given in the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary:\(^7\) *saḫaraššubbû, epqu, garābu, garāšu* and *būšānu*. These are distinct from those for eczema (*guraštu* or *kuraštu*, *laqlaqqu* and *šīqu*), and from a variety of other skin diseases (such as *garārtu* or *karārtu*, *ḥazīqatu*, *kiṣṣatu*, *ūndu* and *zirgu*), a rash (*kibšu*) and scabies (*ekkētu* or *eggētu*).

It is often stated that some of Alexander’s soldiers having been infected in India (327-326 BCE) carried leprosy with them on their return.\(^8\) However, the disease may have been known in Persia and Egypt prior to that. For example, Herodotus, writing about 440 BCE, stated that *lepra* was known in Persia where affected individuals were isolated\(^9\) and “leprosy” is mentioned in the *Avesta* of the Zoroastrians.\(^10\) “Leprosy” was also known in Egypt because a treatment was described in the Ebers Papyrus\(^11\) which dates from about 1550 BCE, but was probably copied from a much older source. More recently, it has been speculated\(^12\) that “leprosy” was spread by the trade between India and the east coast of Africa, which may be consistent with one of the possibilities described by Monot et al.\(^13\)

Despite the proliferation of labels and the documentary record, it is unlikely that what we know as leprosy was known in ancient Mesopotamia. Palaeopathological studies of skel-
et al., remains and the detection of M. leprae DNA in ancient bone have led to the unambiguous identification of cases of leprosy in India\textsuperscript{14} dating from about 2000 BCE, in Egypt\textsuperscript{15} in the second century BCE, Israel\textsuperscript{16} and in Central Asia\textsuperscript{17} dating from the first millennium CE and later throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{18} The lack of such physical evidence from ancient Mesopotamia may simply reflect the small number of reports of skeletal remains\textsuperscript{19} and this may not serve as evidence for the absence of leprosy at the time. Nevertheless, it does prompt a reconsideration of whether saharašubbû, epqu, garabû, garāṣu and būšānu could have been leprosy.

There is a risk in attempting to attach a modern diagnosis, based on a relatively small number of fragments of text, to a disease that is millennia old.\textsuperscript{20} However, this has not proved to be a deterrent previously, so here we adopt the conservative approach of Kinnier Wilson\textsuperscript{21} and use the available text to test four characteristics of leprosy: that (i) any description of the symptoms were not inconsistent with the disease, (ii) no attempt was made to cure it, (iii) it was incurable and (iv) those affected were excluded from society. We consider the first of these criteria to be the weakest because communication between the doctor and patient can be difficult even when they can talk to one another; and when they are separated by a few millennia the probability of miscommunication is even higher. However, the fourth criterion may not be reasonable unless it can be demonstrated that exclusion was reserved for particularly severe illness. Finally, we assume that the words were used consistently, which seems reasonable given that texts differing in age by almost a millennium are often very similar.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{saharašubbû and epqu}

The literal meaning of saharašubbû is “covered with dust (i.e., with dustlike, whitish scales)\textsuperscript{23} and Kinnier Wilson\textsuperscript{24} argued saharašubbû (or saharašuppû or suharašubbû), was leprosy because it was incurable; affected individuals had the expected symptoms and the sufferers were excluded from society rather than being treated.\textsuperscript{25} He makes the points using two fragments of text. The first\textsuperscript{26} invoked the god Sin to clothe someone completely with leprosy (lepra) until the day (s)he dies and banish him or her. This follows a common pattern (for example, at least one other similar example was translated by Oppert and Ménart\textsuperscript{27}). However, saharašubbû appears in neither of these. Instead, išrubû,
one of a small set (including iššubū and isribū) of similar variants of saḫarašubbū, is written in the text. The symptoms of saḫarašubbū are described in the second passage “[if] the skin of a man exhibits ‘white pūṣu-areas’, or is ‘dotted with nuqdu-dots’, such a man has been rejected by his god and is (to be) rejected by mankind”.²⁸ Kinnier Wilson suggested²⁹ that these two possibilities correspond to the tuberculoid and lepromatous forms of the disease, respectively. Mark³⁰ points out that the skin lesions in leprosy are not white and so dismisses the suggestion that this passage describes the disease, but he did not consider the possibility that the other four terms might refer to leprosy. Both of these passages, like others,³¹ indicate that those affected by leprosy were excluded from society. However, there is at least one example where the exclusion was temporary because “one who had saḫarašubbū has been cleansed and may re-enter his house”.³² Clearly, this also indicates that saḫarašubbū could be cured and there is even a hint that this was the case in the curse “may Sin clothe his whole body in saḫarašubbū which will never lift”³³ and, perhaps, if “you put (wool from the sheep’s forehead) either on an unclean man or on a leper [saḫarašubbū]”³⁴ this might be achieved. Given these three examples, it is likely that saḫarašubbū might be treated; it could be cured and affected individuals might be excluded only temporarily. Given the criteria we outlined above, it seems unlikely that saḫarašubbū could be what is now considered leprosy.

The term epiqu replaced saḫarašubbū in standard Babylonian,³⁵ implying that they might refer to the same disease. Irrespective of this, there is some indication that individuals affected by epiqu were not necessarily excluded. For example, the quotation “he who swears (falsely) by DN and DN, will be covered with epiqu, will become poor and have no son and heir”³⁶ might be taken to indicate that epiqu need not prevent the sufferer from having a son and heir. It is possible to read this as reinforcing the threat, but if epiqu required complete exclusion, there would be no need to make the point.

There is clear evidence that in the past it was understood that some infectious diseases were more dangerous than others. For example, in a letter dating from the 18th century BCE, Zimrilim, King of Mari, wrote to his Queen šītu:

“I have heard that Nanname is suffering from skin lesion; yet, she frequents the palace. It will infect many women with her (ailment). Now, then, give strict orders that no one drink

29- Kinnier Wilson, 1966.
30- Mark, 2002.
31- Nougayrol, 1948.
33- King, 1912: No. 7 ii 16.
34- King 1896: 12-97
35- CAD E 246.
from the cup she uses, and no one sit on the seat on which she sits, and no one lie on the bed on which she lies, so that it should not infect many women with her (ailment). That [skin lesion] is catching.”

This clearly indicates that the “skin lesion” (simmu) was contagious, implying that others were not. Despite this, it was not necessary that the affected woman be excluded. However, it was necessary that care be taken to ensure that the affliction was not passed on and specific infection control measures are given. Moreover, the proverb “a rash [simmu] without a doctor is like hunger without food” implies that simmu was treated. As simmu is equated with epqennu, which means “leprosy-like”; it is likely that a distinction was made between “leprosy-like” diseases that did not require exclusion, and “leprosy” (epqu), consistent with the possibility that it necessitated temporary exclusion.

būšānu, garābu and garāšu

The literal translation of būšānu (or buʾšānu) is “the evil-smelling disease”, but the definitions range from “skin disease” to “übler Geruch, eine Krankheit der Nase” and “a severe disease affecting mouth, nose, and skin”. However, there is a strong suggestion that it is “... a type or stage of leprosy”. In contrast, garābu is defined as “leprosy” and equated with saharašubbu, whereas garāšu is a “malignant skin disease, probably leprosy”, although it appears to be used less frequently than either būšānu or garābu. As both Goetze and Kinnier Wilson maintain, garābu and būšānu are equated to the same logogram, from which it seems reasonable to infer that they must be related. However, garābu and garāšu also share the same logogram, but this differs from that common to garābu and būšānu. Given the relative rarity of garāšu, we feel safe in assuming that the more important connection is that between garābu and būšānu.

However, būšānu appears in the therapeutic texts among diseases of the teeth, implying that it was treated, whether using “wild grape” or hellebore is unclear. That būšānu is treated, and perhaps even cured, is made even more explicit by “you relieve the būšānu, the pulsating in the temples that makes one hop around”. Similarly, the implication of a “medicine against garābu” is that the disease was treated. Consequently, būšānu is unlikely to be leprosy, but, based on the literal translation, Kinnier Wilson suggested that it

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38- CAD S 276.
39- CAD E 246.
40- Kinnier Wilson, 1996.
41- Goetze, 1955.
43- CAD B 350.
44- CAD B 351.
45- CAD G 46.
46- CAD G 49.
47- Goetze, 1955.
48- Kinnier Wilson, 1996.
49- Rawlinson, 1861/1875: 2, 44 No. 2, 13-4.
50- CAD G 49.
52- Kinnier Wilson, 1966.
54- Ebeling, 1919: 321-5.
56- Kinnier Wilson, 1966.
might be scurvy. Subsequently, it was proposed that būšānu might include diphtheria, bronchiectasis, visceral leishmaniasis, acute necrotizing ulcerative gingivitis and a variety of oral infections, culminating in Salīn’s suggestion that būšānu represents a family of pathologies. Whatever būšānu and garābu might have been, they were treated and could be cured and further there was no implication that affected individuals were excluded.

**How are the diseases related?**

If none of the terms identified mean leprosy, which is at least consistent with the view that the Biblical use of the word “leprosy”, should not be taken literally, what might they have been? Bearing in mind our reservations about attempting to attach a modern diagnosis to an ancient disease, we adopt a very conservative approach. The literal meaning of saḫarašubbû is “covered with dust (i.e., with dustlike, whitish scales)”, epqû is also associated with “scales” because the phrase ša e-ep-qa-am ma-lu-ú means “who is full of scab” and the second definition of garābu is “scab”. Given that saḫarašubbû, epqû and garābu are distinguished from eczema in CAD, we infer that they are likely to be more serious, but given the association with scales and scabs, it seems probable that they all have such features (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. Inferred relationships between words defined as leprosy based on the common logograms and word usage.](image)

Then, it seems that būšānu affected the skin, the mouth and the nose, but not the lungs, as is apparent from “if a man is
ill in the lungs and he has būšānu-disease in his mouth”.63 It is also distinguished from epqennu because they are listed separately in “severe chills, epqennu-disease, and būšānu-disease”.64 Of the modern diseases associated with būšānu, several involve bacterial infection (diphtheria, bronchiectasis and acute necrotizing ulcerative gingivitis) and even scurvy may be associated with secondary oral infection.65 While Sālin’s66 suggestion that būšānu represents a family of pathologies is entirely reasonable, a plausible characteristic might be an infection of the skin, mouth and nose. Despite this, the fact that garābu and būšānu are equated to the same logogram67 may imply that they share some characteristics (Figure 1).

**Conclusions**

It is likely that none of the diseases identified as “leprosy” in Mesopotamia can be equated with the modern leprosy. Whether or not this is the case, it is reasonable to assume that some of those affected were treated and others were at least tolerated, even if some of those might have been “... chained in their huts under the walls of the city ...”.68 It is clear that previously other affected individuals were expelled from their community, but some of them were later allowed to return. In these respects, their treatment was more enlightened than any other treatment that was to be seen for centuries.

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